

# Al Qaeda

## Refining a Failing Strategy

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**A**l Qaeda's inability to translate its post-9/11 approval in the Muslim world into a mass movement jihad against the West is prompting a search for new ways to regenerate lost momentum, but the group's inherent weaknesses are likely to prevent progress and gradually discredit its vision for the future of Islam. Al Qaeda's long-term plan—according to the writings of its core leaders, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri—is to move from a small vanguard

movement to the leadership, at least at a nominal level, of a global Islamic insurgency in order to destroy Western influence in the Muslim world and reestablish the historic caliphate.<sup>1</sup> Although many Muslims viewed al Qaeda's early attacks as heroic acts of defiance against unjust U.S. policies, al Qaeda has failed to make the transition to a popular insurgency or win any permanent gains as a result of its conceptual, organizational, and material shortcomings. These include an over-reliance on violence, weak efforts to organize



Damage to Pentagon after September 11 attack

<sup>1</sup> Combat Camera Squadron (Cedric H. Rudisill)

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political support in the Muslim world, a small and diffuse cellular structure, and insufficient safe havens and state sponsorship.

Because these weaknesses have their roots in al Qaeda's radical founding ideology, the group is unlikely to correct them quickly, if at all, and they will undermine any plans to regain the initiative. For instance, although al Qaeda writings show a realistic streak in recognizing the need for operational level adjustments, at the strategic level the group's leaders rigidly believe that violence is a religious obligation, alliances with Muslim "apostates" should be eschewed, and victory is inevitable.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, al Qaeda's religiously based disdain for the materialist aspects of its enemies, both Muslim and Western, will continue to cause the group to underestimate the resilience of its opponents. As a result, any new plans are likely to be neither completely flexible nor fully realistic. They will contain a continuing mismatch between grandiose aims and inadequate strategic concepts and means. Nevertheless, some of al Qaeda's weaknesses, including its rigid worldview and cellular structure, lend the group a measure of determination and survivability that will make its eradication a difficult process that may take decades.

### Flawed Strategy

As Western strategic thinkers have observed, for a nation or group to be militarily effective it must harmonize tactics,

operations, strategy, and policy goals, paying particular attention to strategy as the critical bridge between policy goals and military means.<sup>3</sup> So far, al Qaeda's key strategic concept—fomenting a multistage insurgency against the West and its allies across the Islamic world—has failed to provide this bridge. The group has been unable to knit together its limited tactical means and moderate propaganda capability with its messianic goals.

Al Qaeda's policy goal is to establish a single Islamic fundamentalist government in the territories previously controlled by the historic caliphate or currently containing large Muslim populations—a region stretching from Spain and the Balkans in the west to Indonesia and parts of the Philippines in the east.<sup>4</sup> This government would be based on Sunni Salafist principles, including a return to the practices of Muhammad's first and "most pure" followers, rigid adherence to shariah law, jihad against unbelievers and apostates, and rejection of Western social values. Salafists believe that deviation from "true" Islam is responsible for the loss of Muslim power in the world and that a return to "purist" principles is necessary to restore Islam to its "rightful" position.

Although these goals may appear to Western eyes as so ambitious that they strain credulity, even when viewed as propaganda for eager Islamic militants, al Qaeda believes they are not only possible

but also preordained by Allah.<sup>5</sup> Al Qaeda leaders admit that the disparity in material power between the jihadists and the West necessitates a prolonged struggle, but they also maintain that, because Allah is on the side of the jihadists, the only prerequisite for victory is dedication to jihad—or violent action persistently applied.<sup>6</sup> Intelligently applied violence and adroit propaganda campaigns may speed victory, but al Qaeda leaders do not believe clever strategy is as important as faith and action.

Nevertheless, al Qaeda does have a strategy—to try to foment a global Islamic insurgency in four stages. According to multiple writings by prominent al Qaeda thinkers—including Abu Bakr Naji's *The Management of Savagery*, Zawahiri's *Knights under the Prophet's Banner*, and Abu Hajir al Muqrin's *A Practical Course for Guerrilla War*—the first stage is the awakening. During this phase, al Qaeda doctrine calls for small terrorist cells, funded and directed by al Qaeda's central apparatus, to conduct spectacular mass-casualty attacks against symbolic U.S. targets and other sources of preexisting Muslim resentment to lift what al Qaeda considers a malaise of Islamic defeatism.<sup>7</sup> Al Qaeda believes such violence can radicalize the Muslim population in a way that simple proselytizing cannot. Naji, for example, calls this "reviving dogma and jihad in the hearts of the Muslim masses" and removing the "deceptive media halo" around American power.<sup>8</sup>



Smoke rises over Manhattan 4 days after attack on World Trade Center

U.S. Air Force (Michelle Leonard)



Osama bin Laden poster

DOD

In designing this stage, al Qaeda leaders have shown a keen understanding of the pent-up frustrations and humiliations felt by many young Muslim men. These feelings have been developed through personal experiences similar to Zawahiri's torture in Egyptian jails, vicarious experiences of television images of the Palestinian intifada, or simply the affront to personal identity and self-worth resulting from repeated encounters with the superior success of the West. Zawahiri and bin Laden understand that these sentiments can be tapped by inspirational examples of successful attacks and the explanatory power of their ideology, both of which declare that a return to "authentic" Islam that battles the "corrupting" influence of the West will restore Muslim pride. In this way, the genesis of al Qaeda's terrorism is similar to that of other groups: its violence is an expression of individual frustration, an assertion of peer group identity against threatening outsiders, and the organization's means to influence enemies and gain supporters.<sup>9</sup>

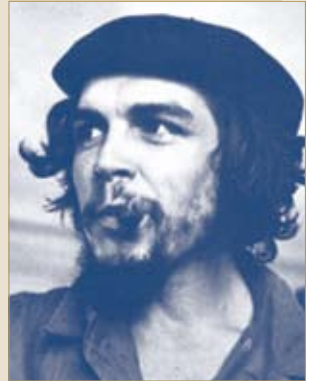
According to Zawahiri, the aims of this stage are to rally Muslims to the al Qaeda banner and boost resources available to the organization—volunteers, monetary donations, and support of similarly minded terrorist groups.<sup>10</sup> Zawahiri and bin Laden hoped that the attacks leading up to and including 9/11 would force either a humiliating U.S. retreat from the Muslim world, for which al Qaeda could claim credit, or a direct U.S. military intervention, which al Qaeda would then propagandize as a "Crusader invasion" to mobilize massive numbers of Muslim volunteers.<sup>11</sup> Some al Qaeda lieutenants also hoped that Washington would compel pro-U.S. Muslim governments to publicly act against militant groups, thereby associating these regimes with subservience to American actions against fellow Muslims and providing Muslims another reason to act.<sup>12</sup> This cycle of actions would widen the scope of conflict and provide real-world combat experience for growing numbers of militants. According to Zawahiri, militants "need to inflict maximum casualties . . . concentrate on martyrdom operations" and choose targets that "restore the struggle to its real size [that is, provoking a type of clash of civilizations]."<sup>13</sup>

In the second stage, al Qaeda aims to harness this militancy by establishing new cells and connecting with like-minded groups, such as Southeast Asia's Jemaah Islamiyah, to expand attacks on Western

### Roots of al Qaeda Strategy

Al Qaeda's strategy is essentially a variation of the "foco" strategy practiced by communist insurgent Che Guevara in the 1960s, which holds that a vanguard group can use violence to create the political and psychological conditions that give rise to popular revolution. Al Qaeda intellectuals have studied the guerrilla theories of Mao Tse-tung and Che and have sought to integrate these ideas with their own experiences—primarily the Afghan war against the Soviets. Bin Laden, Zawahiri, and others saw the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan enflame Muslim passions, attract jihadist recruits from across the world, and lead to the defeat of a superpower. As Zawahiri writes, the Afghan "jihad was a training course of the utmost importance to prepare Muslim mujahidin to wage their awaited battle

against . . . the United States." Che, however, was famously unsuccessful in his attempt to use the foco strategy in Africa and Bolivia because a belief in the righteousness of his cause and the memory of singular success in Cuba clouded his judgment and encouraged him to believe in his theory's universal applicability. Something similar afflicts al Qaeda's judgment and application of the "lessons" of the Soviet-Afghan war.



targets and erode U.S. popular will to remain engaged in the Middle East. Naji and al Muqrin suggest that militants attack U.S. economic interests abroad, such as oil facilities, judging that the West's materialist culture cannot abide much economic pain before demanding changes in U.S. policies perceived as prompting the attacks. According to Naji, "aiming blows of vexation directly toward the economy is the most important element of cultural annihilation since it threatens the opulence and [worldly] pleasures which [Western societies] thirst for."<sup>14</sup> Al Muqrin explains that the uncertainty these attacks produce would roil Western economies disproportionately to their physical damage.<sup>15</sup> Al Qaeda's call for inflicting heavy casualties on U.S. military forces in the Middle East stems from a similar belief that U.S. culture cannot stomach the loss of more than a few American lives. Naji writes, "If the number of Americans killed is one tenth the number of Russians killed in Afghanistan and Chechnya, they will flee, heedless of all else. . . . They have reached

a stage of effeminacy which has made them unable to sustain battles for a long period of time."<sup>16</sup>

*al Qaeda doctrine calls for attacks against sources of preexisting Muslim resentment to lift what al Qaeda considers a malaise of Islamic defeatism*

Al Qaeda intends to exploit weakening U.S. prestige during this stage to break the bonds between America and its allies, especially in the Middle East. The organization hopes that the casualties and economic pain inflicted on the United States will prompt isolationist tendencies among Americans, thereby separating pro-U.S. Muslim governments from U.S. support.<sup>17</sup> The group also hopes an image of American weakness would reduce the confidence that U.S. allies have in the benefits of ties to Washington. As Naji makes clear, this aspect of al Qaeda strategy

stems from a belief in the Afghan mujahideen's central role in the destruction of the Warsaw Pact as a result of the Soviet-Afghan war: "By removing respect for the Russian army from the hearts of the masses whose regimes used to revolve in [the Soviet] orbit in Europe and Asia . . . one after another, they began to fall away and desert it."<sup>18</sup>

The third stage—which Naji calls "the management of savagery" and from which he draws the title of his book—is the establishment of safe havens that would allow al Qaeda to build large training camps, conduct logistic support activity more openly and efficiently, and dispatch fighters to neighboring countries to expand the group's influence. These areas would be created by defeating local security

forces or exploiting already ungoverned areas. In this stage, al Qaeda would control one or more "liberated" zones, as described in traditional insurgent doctrine, and therefore be compelled to provide basic government services for people living in the area, indoctrinate the masses, develop a rudimentary internal security force, and secure and expand the zone against outside pressure.<sup>19</sup>

Naji calls this stage the most critical because of the safe haven's contrasting vulnerability and potential for wider success. He recognizes the danger of weak insurgent forces expending scarce resources on population administration while simultaneously trying to defend territory and export the movement to other areas. Nevertheless, he also sees the

maintenance of a safe haven as "the bridge to the Islamic state which has been awaited since the fall of the caliphate."<sup>20</sup>

The fate of Iraq looms large in this stage, since Zawahiri has long emphasized the importance of al Qaeda gaining a territorial foothold more centrally located than its previous base in Afghanistan: "The mujahid Islamic movement will not triumph against the world coalition unless it possesses a fundamentalist base in the heart of the Islamic world."<sup>21</sup> In 2005, bin Laden and Zawahiri called on al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to prepare to consolidate a safe haven in the country. Zawahiri warned that the group needed to be ready to handle a precipitous U.S. withdrawal by preventing Sunni tribes, Shia militias, and other native elements from squeezing out al Qaeda.<sup>22</sup> Although AQI tried to do this—renaming itself the Islamic State of Iraq to be seen as an inclusive and indigenously led organization, for example—it failed to broaden the group's appeal.<sup>23</sup>

### Al Qaeda's WMD Option

Al Qaeda's material shortcomings will limit its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) development and employment options. There is no credible evidence that the group possesses more than a small-scale chemical weapons capability, demonstrated in captured video showing a dog dying in a cloud of unidentified white vapor.<sup>1</sup> According to the director of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, al Qaeda had limited development capabilities in Afghanistan before the U.S. invasion, and since then its lack of money and unstable safe havens have probably exacerbated problems with the internal-development option.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the revelation in the 1990s of a network run by Pakistani scientist A.Q. Khan—in which nuclear weapons knowledge and technology were sold to Iran and North Korea—shows the possibility of religiously, politically, and financially motivated transfers of WMD knowledge, and potentially capability, to al Qaeda.

There also is little indication how al Qaeda might prioritize WMD acquisition or use WMD operationally. Al Qaeda's most frequent WMD references are to chemical weapons development and use, but nuclear, biological, and radiological weapon acquisition efforts are possible, despite their low likelihood of success. Al Qaeda's desire to justify

WMD use to Muslim audiences may focus its targeting on U.S. military assets on American soil (a re-attack on the Pentagon with WMD, for example) and possibly Israel, if operationally feasible. Use against civilians would not gain more media coverage and could alienate its remaining Muslim supporters.<sup>3</sup>

*the third stage is the establishment of safe havens that would allow al Qaeda to dispatch fighters to neighboring countries*

The transition from safe haven to the fourth stage of creating an Islamist state is not well articulated in al Qaeda literature, probably because more thought has been given to conducting the current fight with its more definable parameters, but some al Qaeda writings on the subject are available. Al Muqrin's *Guerrilla War* holds up the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan as a possible model, describing the Taliban victory over the post-Soviet government as a series of small battles that acquired increasing amounts of territory and eventually broke the government's will.<sup>24</sup> In this scenario, no decisive conventional offensive is envisioned as necessary for installing Islamists into authority, only a power vacuum in the political center. Naji writes that if an opposing government is weak enough and the surrounding pro-al Qaeda forces strong enough, assassination of key enemy leaders may precipitate the collapse.<sup>25</sup>

A group as diffuse and nonhierarchical as al Qaeda will vary its application of this strategy. Operatives strike at targets of opportunity and different militant writers



<sup>1</sup> Jack Boureston, "Assessing Al Qaeda's WMD Capabilities," *Strategic Insight* 1, no. 7 (September 2002), 3, available at <[www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/sept02/wmd.asp](http://www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/sept02/wmd.asp)>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Jerry Mark Long, "Strategic Culture, Al-Qaida, and Weapons of Mass Destruction," report prepared by Science Applications International Corporation for Defense Threat Reduction Agency, November 20, 2006.

break down or aggregate the stages differently, sometimes mixing the first stage “awakening” and second stage attrition of U.S. power. Also, because real-world application of strategic theory is seldom as neat as it appears on paper, these stages often overlap in different areas at different times. For instance, al Qaeda continues to try to wear down U.S. forces in Iraq while building a safe haven in the Pashtun tribal area of northwestern Pakistan.

### Weakness Limits Growth

Despite the energy devoted to developing and implementing its strategy, al Qaeda’s inherent weaknesses prevent it from reaching the strategy’s penultimate goal—the creation of a global Muslim fundamentalist insurgency. As can be seen in each of the stages described above, al Qaeda’s core weakness is its ideologically based overreliance on violence, which limits its strategic flexibility, ability to attract a large Muslim following, and capacity to consolidate early success (such as in Iraq). Moreover, al Qaeda’s idea that violence can spark a global clash of cultures tends to obscure the need to understand local conditions where the group hopes to nurture branch al Qaeda movements. Without a more flexible strategic concept, al Qaeda will remain unable to grow beyond a cell-based terrorist network.

Thus far, al Qaeda has not shown any ability to create a broadly appealing vision for the future or cement the loyalty of more than a small number of dedicated jihadists. Even in Afghanistan, where al Qaeda and the Taliban had years to do their proselytizing, al Qaeda ideologue Abu Musab al Suri complained that friendly tribal groups quickly surrendered or betrayed al Qaeda members to U.S. forces during the post-9/11 invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup> Bin Laden and Zawahiri have vacillated between publicly criticizing the failure of Muslims to rally to the anti-Western cause and recognizing the need to craft better appeals to mass Muslim audiences, to little effect thus far.<sup>27</sup>

Part of the problem is that al Qaeda’s vision of a global religious movement causes it to eschew ethnic, nationalist, political, and economic appeals in favor of fundamentalist and anti-Western appeals, despite the fact that insurgencies featuring ethnonationalist appeals have proven the most successful over the past century.<sup>28</sup> The education given to most al Qaeda militants, according to bin Laden’s former bodyguard Abu Jandal,

includes putting “the issue of nationalism . . . out of our minds.”<sup>29</sup> Al Qaeda’s response to conflict in Iraq between local nationalist insurgents and nonindigenous al Qaeda cell leaders was to create a fictitious native Iraqi leader named “Abu Omar al Baghdadi” to front for AQI—hardly a systematic solution.<sup>30</sup> Even in Saudi Arabia, with its conservative Wahabi religious tradition, many people publicly criticized al Qaeda militants after their attempts to damage the country’s oil facilities.<sup>31</sup>

As a result, al Qaeda has remained an elitist movement that draws general Muslim approval for trying to reduce U.S. power, but it fails to attract participation from most Muslims because of its hardcore fundamentalist message. According to Christopher Henzel’s study of the origins of al Qaeda’s ideology:

*For all the importance that Zawahiri attaches to political action and organization among the masses, the revolutionary Salafists have aroused . . . little popular response to their efforts. In his 2002 book Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam, Gilles Kepel argues convincingly that contemporary political Islamist movements can succeed only when they are able to mobilize, and maintain an alliance between, the masses and pious middle classes. Natural tensions between the two constituencies are inherently difficult to control and are repeatedly the downfall of contemporary political Islamist movements, most notably in Algeria.*<sup>32</sup>

Al Qaeda’s overreliance on violence also has contributed to its neglect of the political organization necessary to harness any popular support that might be generated by an improved message. Al Qaeda’s small clandestine structure has no ability to indoctrinate, organize, discipline, or direct large numbers of Muslims or engage in mass dissident activities, such as riots or demonstrations. Radical mosque and religious school (*madrasa*) leaders, combined with

*al Qaeda has remained an elitist movement that draws general Muslim approval for trying to reduce U.S. power, but it fails to attract most Muslims because of its hardcore fundamentalist message*

Internet and broadcast videos glorifying attacks on Western forces, may generate a few recruits, but without a semi-overt political organization able to communicate quickly and frequently with large numbers of people, al Qaeda is unlikely to produce mass activism in any form, violent or non-violent. On the other hand, Hizballah, which some analysts have called the world’s most effective Islamic insurgency, has built an efficient grassroots organization on Lebanese territory with strong government-like social services.<sup>33</sup>



Iraqi citizen talks to Iraqi and U.S. soldiers

U.S. Army

Even worse for al Qaeda, its ideology of violence reduces the pool of potential allies and arouses enemies, limiting its freedom to operate. Although al Qaeda maintains ties to like-minded Islamist terrorist groups, its ideologues have dismissed other anti-Western groups. Bin Laden and Zawahiri have criticized the Muslim Brotherhood for “confusing” Muslims with ideas on nonviolent religiously based change. Even Hamas, a violently anti-Israeli Palestinian organization, comes under verbal al Qaeda attack for participating in Western-style elections and moderating its violence for “ephemeral” political gains.<sup>34</sup> In turn, groups such as Hamas and Hizballah have avoided close ties to al Qaeda, probably over concern that such links would create more Western and regional opposition to their activities without any compensating benefits. Meanwhile, al Qaeda attacks have awakened local security services such as those in Saudi Arabia, which were willing to ignore militant activities directed against theaters abroad until the al Qaeda faction in Arabia began strikes against economically vital oil facilities.<sup>35</sup>

Another crucial al Qaeda weakness is its lack of material resources. Most successful

insurgencies receive material assistance, political support, and a measure of international legitimacy from one or more nation-states. Hizballah, for instance, gains great material benefit from Iran and Syria. Al Qaeda has no state sponsor and must rely on wealthy like-minded Muslims, illegal contributions from some Muslim charities, and criminal enterprises such as drug dealing and kidnap-ransom schemes in Iraq to generate money to travel, buy weapons, and generally support itself. According to unnamed U.S. intelligence officials quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*, al Qaeda’s core leadership, rebuilding its former Afghanistan safe haven in Pakistan’s tribal areas, is limited in the funds it can disburse to cells abroad and is surviving on money from criminal enterprises in Iraq.<sup>36</sup> These funds are relatively small, sent in tranches of several tens of thousands of U.S. dollars, and some of it probably goes to ensuring the goodwill of Pakistani tribal allies.<sup>37</sup>

### Strength Ensures Survivability

Unfortunately, these weaknesses do not mean al Qaeda will quickly collapse because its countervailing strengths—a dis-

persed organization and an ability to attract groups, however small, of highly motivated young men—invest the organization with considerable survivability and resiliency. Al Qaeda maintains a network of geographically dispersed clandestine cells that often operate without knowledge of each other to boost security. Although these cells increasingly function without support from al Qaeda leaders, they have become financially self-sustaining and draw some operational benefits from Web-based doctrine, training manuals, and propaganda. This type of structure may inhibit sophisticated large-scale operations, but it makes the organization difficult to identify and roll up as a whole.

The other great strength of al Qaeda is its determination to continue the fight, expressed in its guerrilla war concept and supported by its religious belief in preordained victory. Because group members face long odds for personal survival and see ultimate victory as a distant prospect, there are no “free riders” attracted to material benefits the group might provide. Thus, most members are likely to be highly motivated.<sup>38</sup> This mindset gives al Qaeda operatives mental resilience in the face

U.S. flag waves over abandoned fighting position overlooking Bagram, Afghanistan



9821 Combat Camera Squadron (Michael Bracken)

▲ Download as computer wallpaper at [ndupress.ndu.edu](http://ndupress.ndu.edu)

of setbacks, making it difficult for the West to inflict a decisive psychological defeat. It also makes defections unlikely and recruiting al Qaeda personnel into Western intelligence networks problematic.

### Trying to Adapt

In the months ahead, al Qaeda is likely to try to leverage these strengths to regain momentum in the area that al Qaeda writings consider most vital and where both threats and opportunities are most fluid—the Middle East; but the group's mindset is likely to limit new plans to the operational level and prevent the development of new strategic paradigms. The main change is likely to be more targeted violence and more sophisticated media campaigns to gain quick political and psychological victories in the region.

Given al Qaeda's aim of gaining a safe haven in the heart of the Middle East and the fading opportunity to secure one in Iraq, the group may seek to influence the U.S. Presidential election by increasing attacks on American forces in Iraq and thus the attractiveness to U.S. voters of candidates calling for quick withdrawal. Following the success of

and criticized the Bush administration (not America) for plunging Iraq into civil war.<sup>40</sup> He also discussed the failure of U.S. Democratic legislators to bring troops back to America, blaming pressure from U.S. business interests. Although bin Laden appears not to understand that as the lead perpetrator of the 9/11 attacks he has no credibility as a statesman-like figure in the United States, he is clearly trying to influence U.S. deliberations on Iraq through more traditional political arguments rather than direct threats.<sup>41</sup>

Further evidence of the possibility of a targeted operational campaign is the growing type of Internet literature called "jihadi strategic studies."<sup>42</sup> This literature includes realistic discussion of short-term Western vulnerabilities, the best example of which was the Web site, visited by the 2004 Madrid train bombers before their operation, that advocated terrorist attacks on European countries to destroy their support for U.S.-led operations in Iraq.<sup>43</sup> The site noted Spain's vulnerability to such operations due to the growing divide between the pro-U.S. Government camp and a population increasingly dissatisfied with the government's support for the war in Iraq. Given

worry that English-speaking al Qaeda operatives living in Europe could take advantage of the visa waiver program and their familiarity with Western ways to eventually strike in the United States once again.<sup>45</sup>

### Dead End

Even with more focused operations, al Qaeda will continue to struggle to achieve its goals. Attempts to more precisely target violence for political effect, across a variety of differing political and security environments, using the increasingly loose network of sometimes poorly trained and poorly resourced cells, will be problematic. New operational ideas will not be absorbed or applied equally by all cells, and al Qaeda has not implemented any systematic solutions to its structural weaknesses. Thus, the results are likely to be less decisive than bin Laden and Zawahiri may expect.

To achieve its goals, the United States should consider the following actions, always mindful of the psychological impact of each action on allied, al Qaeda, and wider Muslim audiences:

- kill or capture dedicated al Qaeda members resistant to psychological defeat
- continue to target al Qaeda safe havens, directly or through regional allies, to limit al Qaeda logistics, training, and command and control activities
- continue to disrupt al Qaeda's Internet-based training, command and control, money transfers, and propagandizing designed to aid the creation of new cells
- publicize Western successes against al Qaeda to strengthen impressions of U.S. strength and shrinking al Qaeda capabilities and popularity—thus discouraging fence sitters from joining an organization headed for defeat
- avoid exaggerations and disinformation in U.S. information operations that may undermine American credibility
- describe *intentional* al Qaeda efforts to harm fellow Muslims—killing Iraqi soldiers, assassinating civilians, and blocking humanitarian aid efforts, for example (this is different from showing al Qaeda's disregard for bystanders, which Muslims observing at a distance can rationalize as "collateral damage")
- enable former militants and Muslims harmed by al Qaeda to tell their stories
- choose strategic communications words and themes carefully, with the Muslim

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## *religious belief in preordained victory gives al Qaeda operatives mental resilience in the face of setbacks, making it difficult for the West to inflict a decisive psychological defeat*

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the U.S. military "surge" in reducing violence in Iraq, such a strategy may be calculated to have a "Tet-like" psychological impact—highlighting the cost of continued involvement and the difficulty of achieving lasting stability, while prompting Western media claims that White House statements of progress are unwarranted. Although it is difficult to gauge the potential political effectiveness of renewed attacks in Iraq, studies of Palestinian terrorist violence preceding Israeli elections indicate that attacks on nonlocal targets—that is, strikes against fellow Israelis but far from a voter's neighborhood (as Iraq would be for U.S. voters)—tend to boost support for peace candidates.<sup>39</sup>

Al Qaeda would probably supplement this more targeted violence with continued efforts to fashion an increasingly sophisticated media campaign. In his September 7, 2007, video aimed at U.S. viewers, for example, bin Laden made no overt threats, wore a dyed beard to appear more youthful,

the widely accepted notion that the Madrid bombings led directly to the electoral defeat of Spanish President Jose Maria Aznar and the subsequent withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq, al Qaeda probably has already incorporated this lesson into its thinking.

Meanwhile, al Qaeda will continue to try to make its presence felt in other areas to bolster its claim of being a worldwide movement. Its central leadership will seek to further strengthen its base in the loosely governed and geographically rugged Pashtun tribal areas of eastern Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan. Also, al Qaeda is likely to mount new attacks in Europe to further undermine support for U.S. Middle East policies and harness the large and partially disaffected Muslim population in Western Europe. Al Qaeda has pledged to strike Germany, Italy, Denmark, and the Vatican, and Britain's intelligence chief in November 2007 said publicly that he believed the terrorist threat had not "reached its peak."<sup>44</sup> Moreover, U.S. authorities

worldview in mind—for example, “new freedoms,” “justice,” “anticorruption,” and “improved economic and educational opportunities” are likely to resonate better than “democracy” and “political pluralism,” which may seem like U.S. cultural imports; in addition, the phrase “moderate Muslim” can be understood as “half-hearted Muslim,” indicating the need for a more sophisticated term

■ pursue international agreements that hinder terrorist activities—cross-border money transfers, for example—both for their own sake and to show broad international support for the war on terror.

As al Qaeda fails to deliver on its promise of increased pride and power for Muslims, its radical influence is likely to fade much like that of the failed Arab nationalist and other radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s. If these Arab nationalist experiences are a useful analogy, however, the decay of al Qaeda’s radicalism may likewise take decades. In the meantime, al Qaeda terrorists may cause great physical damage and human suffering, especially if they acquire weapons of mass destruction. It behooves the West, therefore, to maintain pressure on al Qaeda weaknesses to undermine its military capacity and speed its strategic decline. **JFQ**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Henzel, “The Origins of al Qaeda’s Ideology: Implications for US Strategy,” *Parameters* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2005), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Cigar, “Al Qaeda’s Doctrine for Insurgency: A Translation and Analysis,” Marine Corps War College, August 2007, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, eds., *Military Effectiveness, Volume I: The First World War* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, Inc., 1988), 26–27; and James D. Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xii.

<sup>4</sup> This goal is not stated explicitly in any al Qaeda document or public statement, but it can be inferred from study of the group’s multiple statements of goals.

<sup>5</sup> See discussion of Allah’s preordained victory in Cigar, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Knights under the Prophet’s Banner*. Serialized in London-based daily *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 2001. Trans. Foreign Broadcast Information Service, 2002 (BIS–NES–2002–0108), 95.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Cullison, “Inside Al-Qaeda’s Hard Drive,” *The Atlantic Online*, September 2004, 15, available at <<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200409/cullison>>.

<sup>8</sup> Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery*, trans. William F. McCants (Cambridge: John M. Olin Institute of Strategic Studies, Harvard University, May 23, 2006), 1, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Chris E. Stout, ed., *Psychology of Terrorism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 49.

<sup>10</sup> Zawahiri, 47, 102.

<sup>11</sup> Cullison, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Naji, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Zawahiri, 100–101.

<sup>14</sup> Naji, 8.

<sup>15</sup> See discussion of Muqrin’s economic targeting ideas in Cigar, 31.

<sup>16</sup> Naji, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Mahan Abedin, “The Essence of Al Qaeda: An Interview with Saad Al-Faqih,” *Spotlight on Terror* 2, no. 2 (February 5, 2005), available at <[www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?issue\\_id=2907](http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?issue_id=2907)>.

<sup>18</sup> Naji, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 11–12.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>21</sup> Zawahiri, 98–99.

<sup>22</sup> Shmuel Bar and Yair Minzili, “The Zawahiri Letter and the Strategy of al-Qaeda,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 3 (February 16, 2006), available at <[www.futureofmuslimworld.com/research/pubID.40/pub\\_detail.asp](http://www.futureofmuslimworld.com/research/pubID.40/pub_detail.asp)>.

<sup>23</sup> Lydia Khalil, “The Islamic State of Iraq Launches Plan of Nobility,” *Terrorism Focus* 4, no. 7 (March 27, 2007), 1–2.

<sup>24</sup> Cigar, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Naji, 69.

<sup>26</sup> Jarret M. Brachman and William F. McCants, “Stealing Al-Qaeda’s Playbook,” Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, February 2006, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard, *Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology*, Congressional Research Service Report RL32759, July 2007, 6; Zawahiri, 50.

<sup>28</sup> Zawahiri, 14; Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 170–171.

<sup>29</sup> Bill Roggio, “Al Qaeda in Iraq Executes Bombing Offensive,” *The Long War Journal*, December 8, 2007, available at <[www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/12/al\\_qaeda\\_in\\_iraq\\_exe.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/12/al_qaeda_in_iraq_exe.php)>.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Scheuer, “Al-Qaeda Doctrine: Training the Individual Warrior,” *Terrorism Focus* 3, no. 12 (March 28, 2006), available at <[www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2369944](http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2369944)>.

<sup>31</sup> Cigar, 25.

<sup>32</sup> Henzel, 77.

<sup>33</sup> Brian Jackson et al., *Aptitude for Destruction, Volume 2: Case Studies of Organizational Learning*

*in Five Terrorist Groups* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2005), 44–53; Daniel Byman, *Understanding Proto-Insurgencies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007), appendix A.

<sup>34</sup> Brachman and McCants, 9; Blanchard, 12; Naji, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Cigar, 41–47.

<sup>36</sup> Greg Miller, “Iraq a ‘big moneymaker’ for al-Qaeda, says CIA,” *The Los Angeles Times*, May 20, 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 9–10, 42–43.

<sup>39</sup> Dennis Foster, Alex Braithwaite, and David Sobek, “Terrorist Violence and Israeli National Elections,” conference paper presented to the International Studies Association, Honolulu, Hawaii, March 5, 2005; Claude Berrebi and Esteban Klor, “Are Voters Sensitive to Terrorism? Direct Evidence from the Israeli Elections,” October 2007, available at <[http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=963965](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=963965)>.

<sup>40</sup> Mary Louise Kelley and Melissa Block, “Bin Ladin Offers No New Threat in Latest Video,” National Public Radio, October 30, 2007, available at <[www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14239653](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14239653)>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Brynjar Lia and Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadi Strategic Studies: The Alleged Al Qaeda Policy Study Preceding the Madrid Bombings,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27, no. 5 (September–October 2004), 355–375.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.; Cigar, 12.

<sup>44</sup> Robert S. Leiken and Steven Brooke, “Al Qaeda’s Second Front: Europe,” *International Herald Tribune*, July 15, 2005; Sarah Lyall, “British Intelligence Chief Sharpens Terrorism Warning,” *The New York Times*, November 6, 2007.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Jacobson, *The Changing and Expanding al-Qaeda Threat*, Policy Watch #1263 (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute, July 25, 2007), available at <[www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2639](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2639)>.